

Published in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Please cite from the published version only. This is the accepted version of the review.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743824000709>

SAMUEL HODGKIN, *Persianate Verse and the Poetics of Eastern Internationalism*, Cambridge Studies in World Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024). Pp. 310. £85.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781009411639.

REVIEWED BY KAYVAN TAHMASEBIAN, School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, SOAS, University of London, London, The United Kingdom;
e-mail: kt27@soas.ac.uk¹

Iranian poet Abu al-Qasim Lahuti writing panegyrics to Stalin in the classical Perso-Arabic form of *qaṣīda*; Russian poet Anna Akhmatova composing a spontaneous *nazira* (imitation) of a *rubaʿi* by medieval Persian poet Khayyam; French author André Gide receiving a Tajik robe of honor as a *silat* (prize given to a poet) in a Soviet congress of writers; leftist poets, Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet and Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, in a *mushaʿira* (poetry recitation gathering) in Tashkent; Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf making visual *talmih* (allusion) to the work of his Armenian peer, Sergei Parajanov, in his films. This is a snapshot of the Persianate communist internationalism that Samuel Hodgkin delineates in his formidable book, *Persianate Verse and the Poetics of Eastern Internationalism*.

The book gives a groundbreaking account of the intertwining of Persianate poetics and Soviet politics from the transregional revolutionary days of early twentieth century Russia, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire, to the fragmentation of the Persianate zone through the Soviet state-building projects in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, the collapse of the USSR, and the post-Soviet era in Eurasia. Hodgkin explores the vast transnational, multinational, and international solidarities that leftist internationalists forged across West, Central, and South

~~Asia, and the Caucasus by incorporating classical Persianate forms and rituals that transcended national~~
¹ This work was produced within the framework of GlobalLIT (Global Literary Theory), supported by European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under ERC-2017-STG Grant Agreement No 759346.

Published in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Please cite from the published version only. This is the accepted version of the review.

boundaries. He offers great insight into the dialectical entanglement of politics and poetics on a vast transregional scale in which Persianate poetics was used as a means of cultural diplomacy between the Soviet Union and the Third World. Hodgkin also meticulously demonstrates how the poetry published in the communist press across the Ottoman, Iranian, and Russian empires contributed to the modernization of the Persianate poetics, which was further institutionalized through Soviet-inspired writers unions. The book contains fascinating stories of poets who turned into bureaucrats and politicians who turned to poets to advance Soviet propaganda.

Persianate Verse is one of the first in a series of new monographs published by Cambridge University Press that proposes to “offer insights into new cartographies of literary production” on wider and more dynamic scales than monolingual and national literary histories. This focus is articulated through the use of the word “Persianate” in the title of the book. A new spirit of scholarship in Iranian Studies over the past two decades has seen the rise in the use of the term “Persianate.” Hodgkin makes effective use of this trend in his book by situating the evolution of modern Persian literature within a multilingual and transregional context. He achieves this effect by exploring the role of transnational intellectual networks and new civic and educational institutions in the transformation of Persianate literary production beyond the boundaries of Persophone cultural production.

The book’s organization into five simultaneously thematic and chronological chapters draws our attention away from the simplistic historical periodization of what Hodgkin calls “Eastern Internationalism”: a communist model of world literature, with an extensive network of writers and readers in Persian, Turkish, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Uzbek, and Urdu, unified around a shared commitment to revolutionary social movements in their regions and catalysed by forms and rituals originating in Persian *adab*. However, historical periodization is less important to the

Published in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Please cite from the published version only. This is the accepted version of the review.

organization of *Persianate Verse* than the different roles assigned to Persianate poetic forms and norms within the framework of Eastern Internationalism. These different roles are brilliantly reflected by the epigraphs Hodgkin provides at the beginning of each chapter: *bayts* by Bidil (in Persian from 18th century India), Füzuli (in Oghuz Turkic, from 16th century Iraq), Nava'i (in Chaghatay Turkic, from 15th century Transoxiana), Nizami (in Persian, from 12th century Transcaucasia), and Sayat Nova (in Turkic—but in Armenian script—from 18th century Transcaucasia). Most of the epigraphs are rendered in beautiful *nastaliq* script. This is a welcome divergence from the Westernized typefaces that are typically used in Anglo-American academic books on Persianate literature due to issues with technical compatibility—which is a marker of Eurocentrism in its turn, which the book rejects. The selected epigraphic *bayts* reflect the temporal, spatial, and linguistic breadth of the territory that Hodgkin studies in his book. Meanwhile the author's detailed analysis and close reading of these *bayts* both in each respective chapter and in the conclusion exemplifies his scholarly methodology and approach throughout the book.

The index that the author provides at the end of *The Persianate Verse* further reflects the book's engagement with Persianate forms. Self-identifying as a *tadhkira* (commemorative compendium), the index highlights the constellation of ancient and modern poets, scholars, bureaucrats, and saints that constitute the Eastern Internationalism across times and spaces. The companionship of poets and politicians in this constellation highlights the bureaucratization of poetry characteristic of communist literary internationalism in its Soviet phase which was replaced by more flexible and more liberated forms of solidarity between the artists and writers of the post-Persianate zone in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, giving rise to “queer” and politically contentious potentialities of the Persianate poetics.

Published in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Please cite from the published version only. This is the accepted version of the review.

For this reviewer, coming from a scholarly background in Persian Studies, the book's major contribution lies in the light it sheds on the expressive possibilities of classical Persianate genres within new transnational reception contexts. At the same time, *Persianate Verse* makes a valuable contribution to the fields of comparative literature and world literature. It challenges readers to move beyond Eurocentric perspectives by offering a compelling case for the role of non-Western literary traditions in shaping political movements and fostering international solidarity.

The book's exploration of a non-Eurocentric model of literary world-making steers clear of simplistic binary ideological and methodological categorizations. Hodgkin contrasts the Western-oriented emphasis on written high Persianate forms, such as the *ghazal*, *qasida*, *rubai*, and *masnavi*, specific to elite circles and centers of literary production, with the communist focus on oral low Persianate forms such as folktales, ballad, lullaby, and devotional poetry sung in marketplaces and teahouses. However, he meticulously deconstructs these binaries through extensive examples, detailed analysis, and striking close readings, as for example, when in Chapter 2, he elucidates the tensions in the Persianate canon-making projects of the Stalinist period: On one hand, great classical poets were excluded from the Persianate canon, and attention was paid to folkloristics and oral literature; on the other hand, the classics (like Firdawsi, Nizami, and Navaq'i) were celebrated in Soviet-led international jubilees. While the first strategy was adopted by Soviet proletarian critics to distinguish themselves from Western classical-oriented proponents of world literature, the latter was placed in the service of the Stalinist cult of personality and aimed at consolidating the role of the poet in giving voice to a folk-oriented authoritarian politics.

Published in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Please cite from the published version only. This is the accepted version of the review.

By the same token, in Chapter 4, which is dedicated to the translational dynamics of communist Persianate world literature mainly during the Khrushchev Thaw and after, Hodgkin provides fascinating examples of Russian translators translating writers of the Eastern International, where the translation process was conceptualized through metaphors of love, friendship, and intimacy, rather than the more commonly used metaphors of invasion and conquest in translation modeling. The book opens new vistas on the ideological implications of the domesticating, foreignizing, and non-translation strategies adopted by Russian translators while providing examples of the occasional violation of this friendship by their over-domesticating approaches to the “minor” poets and writers whom they translated. His analysis of the Eastern Internationalist translation methodologies will undoubtedly be widely cited in scholarship on world literature and translation studies. Hodgkin further complicates the antinomy between Western Orientalist and Eastern Internationalist projects by elaborating on instances of complicity between the two despite conflicting political interests. *Persianate Verse* addresses a longstanding need in world literature studies for alternative models of “worlding” literature and is a timely reminder of the enduring power of poetry to bridge divides and create a sense of shared humanity across borders and ideologies.